

Reading an Academic Expository Text – The ESL Learner’s Experience

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ABSTRACT

Researches on approaches to learning have often described students as either deep or surface learners. In essence, the deep approach is associated with intrinsic motivation, a focus on understanding the meaning of the learning material and relating new ideas to previous knowledge. In contrast, the surface approach views a particular task in isolation, a focus on memorizing discrete facts and reproduces terms through rote learning. Although these studies have provided information on the qualitative differences of learning in various contexts, little research has been conducted to examine the students’ learning approaches within an ESL context. Accordingly, the primary purpose of this paper is to describe and compare six ESL learners’ approaches of two readings of an academic expository text. Three instruments were used to collect data: reading sessions, individual interviews and observations, whereby all sessions were videotaped, audio taped and transcribed verbatim. Findings of the study revealed that there were qualitative differences in the ESL approaches of reading an academic expository text and that different types of approaches were employed in the two readings of the text. To conclude, the paper will further discuss the implications of the findings and some pedagogical considerations for the teaching and learning of reading within an ESL context.

INTRODUCTION

Ramsden (1992:21) defines studying in higher education as “an understanding of key concepts; an ability to go beyond the orthodox and the expected so that the hitherto unmet problems can be tackled with spirit; and – closely associated with previous point – an awareness of what learning and understanding in the discipline consists of”. These objectives imply that students are expected to demonstrate a high quality type of learning usually prescribed for higher education. However, research on students’ experiences of higher learning would reveal that many are unable to achieve these goals. Furthermore, evidence would show that the quality of these learning outcomes is the result of variations or different ways in the quality of how students approach learning (Entwistle, & Ramsden, 1983; Ramsden, 1992; Marton & Saljo, 1997).

The pioneering work of Marton (1975) and his colleagues in Gothenburg led to the introduction of the term “approach to learning’. This study investigated in detail one of the main types of learning demanded in higher education – reading academic articles. In this study, students were asked to read an article in their own time and were later questioned on what they learned from the task and how they approached the task. The analysis looked at the process of reading the text and ‘levels of understanding’

(qualitative differences) that students gained after reading the article. These qualitative variations of understanding, also known as different categories of ‘learning outcomes’ (Dahlgren, 1997), were influenced by students’ ‘approaches to learning’ (Marton & Saljo, 1997) that were based on the distinctive intentions that students had before starting the task. Initially, two categories of approach to learning were identified: deep and surface approach. The ‘deep approach’ describes students who began with an intention of understanding the meaning of the article and would then interact actively with the task until maximum meaning was extracted. On the other hand, the ‘surface approach’ describes students’ whose original intentions were to satisfy course requirements, resulting in memorizing information without ‘developing any significant understanding of it’ (Entwistle & Ramsden, 1983; Entwistle, 1997). Later, Biggs (1987) identified a third category of approach – strategic – where students started with the intention of getting the highest possible marks or grades leading them to engage in whatever strategies necessary to earn high marks.

The differences of approaches to learning resulting in qualitatively different learning outcomes reflect the differing quality of learning that is evident in higher education. Thus, those adopting a deep approach to learning would reveal a deep understanding of principles and use of evidence to develop arguments. In contrast, surface learners would reflect a superficial level of understanding, which would lead to substantial knowledge of factual information. Whereas, variable levels of understanding are associated with strategic learners as achievement is dependent on course requirements and assessment methods (Entwistle, 1988; Biggs, 1993).

If learning in the university is seen as ‘enhancing the capabilities of its students’ (Bowden & Marton, 1998), then based on the studies reviewed above, many students are not accomplishing their goals upon graduation from higher education. It is evident that students can retain large masses of information, but more importantly, they are unable to make good use of it. Related studies have demonstrated that students are not willing to seek new knowledge and understanding, and at the same time, incapable of applying learned knowledge to solve problems. Although they have the ability to recite facts and are well conversed with specific terminologies and jargons, they lack the awareness of their limitations in the understanding of the principles of the discipline (Ramsden, 1992). Even more worrisome is that the surface approach to learning seems to be the approach undertaken by many university students (Gibbs, 1992). One important area that will be greatly affected by this approach to learning involves the reading process.

Without doubt, in any academic or higher learning context, reading is perceived as the most prominent academic language skill for all second language learners. It is through reading that these learners will learn new information and be able to synthesize, evaluate and interpret to learn more about their subject matter. The interaction with the text involves “the readers acting and interpreting the text, whereby the interpretation is influenced by an array of variables such as the reader’s past experience, language background and cultural framework, as well as the readers’ purposes for reading (Huddelson, 1994: 130). However, most often, many first year students, specifically second language learners, who enter institutions of higher learning, are found to be

unprepared for the reading demands placed upon them and they encounter difficulties. There are various factors that contribute to the reading problems of these learners at the tertiary level. In Malaysia, for example, factors such as poor reading strategy knowledge, negative perceptions of reading, lack of interest, past experiences and lack of vocabulary knowledge are those often mentioned by researches as contributing toward the students' problems in approaching reading (Ramaiah & Nambiar, 1993; Ramaiah, 1997; Faizah et al, 2002, Wong and Mardziah, 2003).

Thus in view of this problem, the primary purpose of the present study is to examine the phenomenon of student learning, through reading, from the students' perspective, otherwise known as 'phenomenography'. This study will describe in detail six ESL students' experiences of reading an academic expository text that would provide data on the different ways of approaching the text within a Malaysian ESL educational context. In this way, not only are teachers and researchers alike able to understand further how students read, but students too are given the opportunity to have a better understanding as well as an awareness of how they themselves approach reading, and thus, may help improve their quality of the reading process.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the characteristics of the six ESL students' approaches to reading an academic expository text for the first time?
2. What are the characteristics of the six ESL students' approaches to re reading the same academic expository text for the second time?
3. What changes (if any) can be identified in the characteristics of the six ESL students' approaches to reading between the two readings of the text?

METHODOLOGY

The students who constitute the sample population in this study are six second-year Bachelor of Arts students, majoring in English Language Studies (ELS) at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM). These students have completed two semesters of ELS courses, which included proficiency courses on academic skills of speaking, reading and writing, as well as introductory courses on content areas such as linguistics, literature and ELS. The selection of sample for this study was based on 'purposeful sampling', which according to Patton (1990) lies in "selecting information-rich cases from which one

In this study, the researcher relied on the method of 'individual in-depth interview' to collect data. Marshall and Rossman (1995) quote Kahn and Cannell (1957) in describing in-depth interview as 'a conversation with a purpose'. In addition, Glesne and Peshkin (1992:65) point out too that the special strength of interviewing in qualitative enquiries is it presents an "opportunity to learn about what you cannot see and to explore alternative explanations of what you do see." Through this method, "the participants' perspective on

the phenomenon of interest is unfolded as the participant views it, not as the researcher views it” (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). Thus, to ensure a ‘subjective view’ of the matter, the researcher uses the ‘general interview guide approach’, also known as the semi-structured interview. According to Patton (1990:111), the interview guide “provides topics or subject areas about which the interviewer is free to explore, probe, and ask questions that will elucidate and illuminate that particular subject”. Hence, the interviewer is free to word the questions spontaneously and establish a ‘conversational style’, yet at the same time, would maintain the focus of the interview and allow ‘individual perspectives and experiences to emerge’. All interview sessions were tape-recorded, transcribed verbatim and checked for accuracy by a second individual.

The text used in the present study to describe the ESL students’ approaches to reading is an academic expository text and it was chosen for the main reason that these students were constantly in contact with texts of this nature during their course of study at the University. Although expository texts have been used quite extensively in a multitude of phenomenographical studies to describe students’ experiences of learning, no studies have been conducted within an ESL setting.

RESULTS OF STUDY

Following the analysis of the interview transcripts of the reading sessions, the following deep and surface categories were identified:

Table 1.1: Characteristics of reading approaches

READING	CATEGORIES OF APPROACHES	
	DEEP	SURFACE
1	<input type="checkbox"/> Intrinsic motivation <input type="checkbox"/> Interacting actively with the text <input type="checkbox"/> Using various strategies in identifying key words and main points <input type="checkbox"/> Identifying the link between paragraphs to understand what text is about	<input type="checkbox"/> Extrinsic motivation of reading text <input type="checkbox"/> Poor application of strategy use <input type="checkbox"/> Focus on identifying gist of each paragraph <input type="checkbox"/> Anxiety of text
2	<input type="checkbox"/> Extrinsic motivation <input type="checkbox"/> Poor application of strategy use <input type="checkbox"/> Focus on identifying gist of each paragraph <input type="checkbox"/> Anxiety of text	<input type="checkbox"/> Anxiety of text <input type="checkbox"/> Extrinsic motivation <input type="checkbox"/> Unsure of strategy use <input type="checkbox"/> Segregates paragraph <input type="checkbox"/> Unsure of main points

First Reading of Text

In the first reading of the text, the researcher discovered several prominent categories. One of these is the intrinsic motive of reading the text. These deep readers were more concerned with the information or knowledge that they would gain from reading the text. They also attempted to assess how this information could be put to use for future purposes such as in their writing assignments. Hence, this would suggest that these readers' motive of reading was for personal or internal improvement rather than expecting external rewards such as getting good grades for examinations, as the following quotations suggest:

...there's a bit of it relevance...so I really treat it like..I'm going to gain something from the text so I really read it like..this is one of my reading material(A1/22-25)

...based on my last experience..maybe I can..I have some ideas on this two (code switching and interference) terms (a bit) so I relate my past, I mean past knowledge with this one..just connect (E1/178-181)

...I can relate to the text because, I know like..I know three languages..I use all three languages and every, every day.. I mix them up, code-switching...(D1/19-21)

In reference to their reading strategies, these deep readers employed various techniques in their reading of the text. One prominent strategy was the rereading strategy which they applied in stages. A further analysis of the rereading technique revealed that there were several steps employed by these readers. The first reading of the paragraph focused on glancing what the paragraph was about. The second reading was more focused where the readers attempted to identify the main points in the paragraph. A similar approach was employed for the remaining paragraphs in the text. However, when reading the following paragraphs, the reader would attempt to link the points identified with those in the previous paragraphs. These actions indicated that there was constant monitoring of the points presented in the text. Through rereading and linking of ideas or points, these readers were seen as checking and confirming as well as keeping track of the ideas presented by the author. Another strategy used was the 'advance organizers' that they drew to help with organizing information leading to a better understanding of the linking between points and ideas. It was interesting to note that only the deep readers were discovered to utilize such 'frameworks' in their readings, as the following extract reveal:

...sometimes I do summarization because I do it in rangka (framework). I don't really like learn it in paragraph so I just make it into rangka..because rangka (framework) is much more easier to see..this one a bit difficult to see...so I transform this wording into a rangka (framework) (E1/333-337)

...uh..the notes are basically..main ideas..some of it..I'll link one idea to another idea. So, you can see a lot of arrows going down all sorts of things because its like the first idea contributes to the second idea...(A1/111-115)

The surface readers on the other hand were greatly affected by the anxiety and apprehension that they experienced when they approached reading the text. In fact, based on the researcher's analysis and observations, almost all (five out of the six subjects)

mentioned this ‘fear’ when they approached a text that is lengthy and ‘wordy’. The following quotations reflected their experiences:

...this passage is quite, very..uh..thick. I not sure whether I going to understand or not, but I just try to read it first, then only I can decide whether I can understand or I don't understand (C1/40-41)

...I find the text..mm..fo example, like too many wordings and too factual, I guess (E1/16-17)

...I hope its not that much, I mean..not too many wordslah..(B1/70)..it's quite long..(B1/79)

...I was thinking so many things...okay first, is it going to be difficult (D1/63-65)

This was their first reaction and impression of the text even before they started reading the text. According to Krashen's (1982) ‘filter hypothesis’, students would put up the filter if threatened in any way. In this case, having a high filter would affect their reading as well as understanding of the text. Reading long passages can be a daunting task resulting in readers having a negative perception of the text. Based on this assumption, they would approach reading with a set mind that the text is difficult. Having such negative perceptions of the text would greatly affect their purpose or motive of reading, which consequently would influence how they read the text.

The subjects were also discovered to be greatly affected by ‘examinations’ and ‘assessments’ that their purpose of reading a text was basically to be able to answer questions – hence portraying an extrinsic motive of reading, as the following extracts reveal:

...because you ask me to read so I just read..but I know maybe you going to ask me a question so just to make sure whether which one is important for me, then when you ask questions so that I can answer (C1/53-55)

...firstly because you asked me to..secondly because of my course..thirdly..for my knowledge(F1/40-41)

...if you ask any question about the text and then if I cannot answer then, so I have to remember some things, I have to really understand the text, so I could answer it (B1/101-102)

Motivation can be considered as the most essential component within the reading process as it starts with the purpose or motive of reading a text that would lead the reader to be actively involved in the reading process. According to Bandura (1977), intrinsic motivation is defined as “the desire to perform or take part in activities without such external inducement or reward (p.107-9)”. However, if readers started with an extrinsic motive, they will be unable to interact actively with the text as their focus is to produce correct answers for any questions asked.

Finally, the analysis also revealed that these surface readers employed a poor application of strategies when reading the text. The subjects were discovered to read paragraph by paragraph and focusing on identifying the main points in each paragraph, without linking the ideas between paragraphs. In addition, an extensive use of underlining and highlighting was employed to accommodate their incompetence of identifying the main points, as the following extracts suggest:

...I just read and then which I think is important or I don't understand I just ..uhm..put a line ..that all(C1/80-81)

...the important things..uh..what I think important in the text like who code-switch, why they code-switch..I just underline (C1/130-131)

...if the reasons take a long sentence then I just underline they all (B1/245)

Hence it might seem impossible for these subjects to identify the writer's argument in the text if they read in a linear fashion. They might only be able to identify the gist or the main idea that is presented in each paragraph but yet are unable to link the ideas together as they are focusing on the main idea of each paragraph and not the text as a whole. The following section presents the analysis of the second interview.

Second Reading of Text

When comparing the changes that occurred between the categories in the first and second interview, the researcher discovered several similarities and differences. The categories interpreted as different were seen as extensions to those categories discovered in the first interview. One similar category within the deep approach was intrinsic motivation where the subjects were discovered to maintain their interest and positive attitudes toward reading the text. They commented that the information gained from the text could be used for 'future' purposes such as incorporating the ideas into their essay writing. Another similar category was the linking of ideas and forming of 'framework'. The subjects still used these 'organizers' in helping them to organize a large amount of information so that they were able to understand the ideas presented in the text. At the same time, they were also able to follow the linking of ideas and how the author presented his points and arguments on the topic.

However, the researcher discovered a different category that emerged in the deep approach in reference to reading strategies. Analysis of the data revealed that the deep subjects planned their reading strategies (metacognition) when approaching the text. They were discovered to concentrate on problematic points or pages to enhance their understanding of the text. In addition, they also maintained the drawing of diagrams or frameworks to help process information. Using these 'arrows' and 'drawings', they were able to identify the main points and link them between the paragraphs. As a result, these readers were then able to keep track of the points or arguments presented by the writer.

Simultaneously, in their written notes, these subjects were found to edit by elaborating and adding 'new' notes. In other words, in the second interview, they would summarize the points instead of copying word for word from the text. The notes were 'new' additions and not repeated notes from the previous reading.

Similarly, several similarities and differences within the surface categories were also discovered when comparing the two interviews. The similar categories were, 'anxiety' of text and extrinsic motivation toward approaching the text. These readers were observed as not quite prepared when informed that they would read the same text. They did comment that they were not focused in their first reading, hence were not quite sure what the text was about. Thus to accommodate their incompetence in the previous reading, they took the initiative to read better in the second reading. The reading strategies that these subjects employed were similar to their previous reading where they would 'segregate' or 'compartmentalize' paragraphs and identify the main points in each paragraph. However, this time, they were more concerned at remembering the main points or gist of each paragraph by concentrating on the 'number' of main points available. Their concern did not consider any attempt at linking the main ideas or points between the paragraphs. It was also discovered that their application of certain techniques such as underlining and highlighting were haphazard. These surface readers commented that they were unsure of their actions and due to the subjects' fear of missing out on important points they still resorted to underlining whole sentences. As a result, problems in identifying the main ideas still persisted.

At the end of the second interview session, the subjects were asked their experiences of reading the text for the second time. Most responded by acknowledging that they understood the text better in the second reading. Some of the subjects mentioned that they did not quite understand what they read in their first reading and could only recall the word 'code switching'. More importantly, they were aware that they had missed certain points in their first reading, as one reader commented:

S :yah because this time I'm reading..I notice that I didn't underline this[the last time around] when I was emm.... I didn't notice that this are the[key points] yes this is the most important than the previous one maybe the previous one I don't really understand the passage maybe that's what I could say coz when I read this one like I really can open my eyes and see that there are more important points that I can see emm in their talking..(C/84-87).

Despite constant reminders by the researcher that there was no time limit to read the text there were some who commented that they were 'in a hurry' to finish reading the first time. This data revealed that the way readers approached a text the second time is influenced by how it was read the first time. In other words, if students experienced 'problems' in their first reading, then these problems will still persist and be carried forward when they approach the text the second time.

CONCLUSION

Findings of this study have revealed that there existed variations in the reading approaches of the six second year BA ELS subjects. In reference to the 'categories of description', they reflected the 'themes' that became the focal point of the subjects when they approached reading the text each time. Hence, these categories could be further described as 'qualitative differences or variations' that were placed hierarchically to represent the deep and surface approaches of reading and academic expository text. More

interestingly, in comparison to findings of previous studies (example, Marton and Booth, 1997), the researcher discovered similar as well as different categories to emerge in each of the two reading sessions. Although changes were recorded in each reading, further research could enhance the representation of students' approaches to reading if analyzed at individual level.

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